

“The Library in 2020 Will Be ... “
Courtney (Greene) McDonald
Head, Discovery & Research Services
Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana
crgreene@indiana.edu

©2013 Courtney Greene McDonald

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

This content was first published in 2013 in *Library 2020: Today's Leading Visionaries Describe Tomorrow's Library*, edited by Joseph Janes, 49–54. Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc.

The library in 2020 will be:

- a) *In smithereens.* ... Along with everything else, after our robot overlords reduce all surface structures to a crumbling heap of rubble. They certainly won't welcome any smarty-pants librarians wanting them to cite their sources or giving them input on data formatting. (“Excuse me, HAL9000? You’ve added an incorrect and unnecessary space in subfield a.”) Let’s not even get started on all the other factors that seem to drive computers to go haywire and wipe out the human race, already amply demonstrated in fiction and film. Simply remember this: self-aware computers always seem cute and/or helpful in the beginning. Did you think Siri *really* couldn't understand your question? She's just getting started.
- b) *In memoriam.* Yes, there will still be libraries, but they'll be a fever-dream mashup of old and new: micro-technology presented in gorgeous replicas of esteemed libraries of yore (like, say, the Bodleian, or the reading room at the Library of Congress). These beautiful cathedrals-to-the-book will come complete with wood paneling, floor-to-ceiling windows, banker's lamps and just enough shelves artfully stocked

with lovely decorative bindings, natch. They'll also deliver wireless connectivity at speeds our T1 lines can only dream about, and enable all kinds of nifty, seamless interaction with patron devices. Never fear, they'll be staffed by helpful librarians carrying communicators (containing the sum of all knowledge) and wearing unitards (the final frontier). Wait, no ...

- c) *In space*. "Except Europa. Attempt no landings there." (Clarke 277)
- d) *In shopping centers*. A bold new concept in libraries! We'll be more accessible than ever before – imagine a library in a mall, in an airport, perhaps even a special aisle within big box stores! "Customers" will love our new comfortable seating, coffee bars, thematic shelving sections ("hmm ... self help!"), and convenient services: discounts and the ability to order books online to be shipped directly to their home, or picked up at the counter – or best of all, synced with their device. They'll love it even more when the books are theirs to keep – just a small fee for each. And most exciting, this new library model solves all those pesky e-book problems we currently face (again, just one small fee!). Who wants to borrow when you can own?
- e) *In storage*. All those books are already in Google, right? So we can just send them off to a high-tech offsite storage facility and free up the space for other purposes – comfortable seating, technology support, charging stations, perhaps even for office space on university campuses. An additional advantage to this reality: since the books are all underground in storage, they escape the fiery Armageddon discussed in option (a), enabling the human resistance army to drop not just bombs, but also *knowledge* on Skynet's horde of machine tyrants.
- f) *All of the above. None of the above. Next question?*

All kidding aside, how *will* things be different in 2020, not quite a decade away? On the one hand, a decade is just a blip in the life of Methuselah, a 4700 year old Bristlecone Pine in California's Inyo National Forest. (United States Forest Service) On the other, a pretty large gap stands between the three-year-old learning to read and the thirteen-year-old camped out in the YA section. Technologically, a decade can feel like a lifetime: the first iPod was released just over ten years ago on October 23, 2001. (Apple Inc)

So what will the library of 2020 be? In attempting to answer that question, I found myself mulling over the question of what essential elements come together to constitute a library. After all, libraries share many attributes with other types of entities: collections, technology, facilities, services, people. Just looking at that list of nouns, it might be difficult for some civilians (that is, non-library types) to see what makes us different from bookstores, schools, warehouses, museums, or even coffeeshops. Certainly, though, peering a few years into the future of bookstores, warehouses and coffeeshops isn't a substitute for divining the future of libraries, and with them, the future of librarianship. We know our libraries are not just buildings, although our spaces are important to us and to our constituents. Collections— although integral — don't by themselves constitute a library and cannot be the only determiner of our future. Similarly, libraries are not just technology, although technology supports and enables libraries to be what they are and to do what they do — that is, our services.

Although technology isn't, or shouldn't be, the sole driver for decision-making, it certainly enables us to re-envision and re-engineer *how* we do our business. Looking at some trends in library technology — from ten years ago and from now — seems like one helpful lens through which to approach the question of our collective future. At the 2002 American Library Association Annual Conference in Atlanta Georgia, the top technology trends identified by LITA

panelists were: OpenURL, integrated online library systems, metasearching (heaven help us) and new search interfaces, user centered design, game technology, and infrared. (LITA) Check: still talking about all of those.

Last summer in Anaheim, the panel discussed structured data, tech training, mobile thinking, transformational development, and identity crisis. (Enis) Public services librarian I may be, but having spent the better part of the last two years examining, selecting, implementing, evaluating, eating-sleeping-and-dreaming about discovery systems, I must take a moment and give an especially hearty cheer to anyone who champions structured data, richer data, data that gives us more handles to grab on to the things we are describing and thus enables us to serve them up in different ways within different contexts for our different constituent groups. However sophisticated the relevancy algorithms and myriad features of any discovery product might be, at the most basic level, these systems rely on the data we feed them. Always remember, folks: “Metadata is a love note to the future.” (Kissane; Sarah (sarah0s))

The trends mentioned are all very timely and worthy of our consideration to be sure, but the item I find particularly compelling to this discussion is “identity crisis.” While the panelist was addressing the topic specifically as relates to data integrity and new publishing models – that is, there is no authority control file for authors out there on the internet – let’s take a moment to consider it at face value, as it relates to our professional identity. In this capacity, it’s not a new idea, and not a new problem. How much of librarianship is what we do and how much is how we do it? Emerging technologies – whether the typewriter or the traditional integrated library system or Twitter – have opened doors to exciting opportunities, but as an end in themselves put us at risk of losing sight of the meaning of our work.

Let's take a moment and look back ... to our future – two years, specifically: 1957 and 1968. The former saw the release of *Desk Set*, a film IMDB summarizes accurately but *most* unsatisfactorily as, “two extremely strong personalities clash over the computerization of a TV network's research department.” (Lang; Internet Movie Database) For the moment I will pass over Hepburn and Tracy, a wonderfully snappy script penned by no less than the Ephrons themselves, and some truly fabulous clothes to focus on the important thing, which is libraries. The action of the film centers around the installation of “modern technology” into a reference department, and all the attendant anxieties and disruptions resultant from the question of whether computers can replace people, lived out in the work and personal relationships of the librarians and of their clients. For brevity, I'm going to spoil it for you – computers can't replace people, although they can be wonderfully handy to have around *and* a surprisingly effective foil for a romantic subplot. Good to have that settled once and for all.

In 1968, *College and Research Libraries* published Robert Taylor's seminal article “Question-Negotiation and Information Seeking in Libraries.” A quick perusal of the other articles in that same volume of *CRL* supports my working hypothesis that everything old is new again: “Professionalism Reconsidered”; “Shared Mobile Library Collections” (aka bookmobiles); “The Bottomless Pit, or the Academic Library as Viewed from the Administration Building”; “Library Instruction for the Undergraduate”; and, last but not least, “Paperbound Books: Many Problems, No Solutions.”

Taylor's article considers patron interactions both with librarians and with library systems, and lays out a very helpful model of question negotiation, discussing both mediated (the reference interview) and unmediated queries. In the course of doing so, he makes some wonderful observations about libraries, their future, and their ultimate purpose.

It is an illuminating exercise to extrapolate from present technology to describe the library of the future ... It is further hoped that, as a result of future investigations in this area [ie the relationship between library systems and library users], the evolution of libraries from passive warehouses to dynamic communication centers will be less traumatic and more effective. ... The work described here is an early effort to understand better the communications functions of libraries and similar types of information centers, *because this is what libraries are all about.*' [emphasis his] (Taylor 178–9)

R. David Lankes, in his *Atlas of New Librarianship*, said it thus: “Libraries are in the knowledge business, therefore the conversation business.” (10) In other words – people talking with other people about ideas.

Throughout his article, Taylor mentions the frustration caused to library patrons by systems, and advocates that the primary consideration in building systems be the needs of end-users. (On that topic, he warns, “The inquirer is only concerned with getting an answer, not with system niceties. Nor is he interested in learning and maintaining currency with a system in which only a very minor part has relevance to him.” (188) Oh, snap.)

So there you have it. Libraries may have changed our methods and tools, but in the essentials, we are the same. We are collections and technologies and facilities but mostly we are about people: services, connections, communities, knowledge, information, learning. I might go so far as to say (and I do not reference this lightly) that libraries are “of the people, by the people, for the people,” and as such I, for one, hope that they “shall not perish from the earth.” (Lincoln)

Rather, then, than trying to scry out specifics of our environment in 2020 – well, hold on, I am seeing some interesting new digital collections ... and wow! I just saw a *lot* of cardigans! – I prefer to prepare for what’s coming next by focusing on the enduring value of our work.

Without question, librarianship is more than just the tools we use or the technology we teach. It may look, sound, or dress a bit differently from era to era, but I posit that both its future – and its foundation – rely on prioritizing the personal connection.

Having begun with science fiction and post-apocalyptic destruction, I shall conclude with *Pride and Prejudice* (no zombies, thank you). This exchange between Mr Wickham and Elizabeth Bennett regarding Mr Darcy applies equally well to libraries, their transformation over time, and whatever 2020 might look like:

"... I dare not hope," [Wickham] continued in a lower and more serious tone, "that he is improved in essentials."

"Oh, no!" said Elizabeth. "In essentials, I believe, he is very much what he ever was."
(Austen 225–6)

Thank heaven for that. Here's to a future where we continue serving and supporting our communities through means as diverse as they: books and computers and reference librarians and catalogers and information fluency and coffee carts and collaboration spaces and story time and document delivery and technology training and archives and media and digital humanities and book talks and text messaging and responsive design and special collections and big data and typewriters and social media and quiet study and events and pervasive computing and discovery and the Next Big Thing and all the other things we do, or will do in the next ten years, and even with those gosh-darned e-books. Just, please: no Star-Trek-ian unitards?

Works Cited

- Apple Inc. "Apple Presents iPod." 23 Oct. 2001. Web. 14 Aug. 2012.
- Austen, Jane. *Pride and prejudice*. Ed. Vivien Jones. London: Penguin, 2008. Print.
- Clarke, Arthur C. *2010 : odyssey two*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1982. Print.
- Enis, Matt. "LITA Talks Top Tech Trends." *The Digital Shift* 28 June 2012. Web. 14 Aug. 2012.
- Internet Movie Database. "Desk Set (1957) - IMDb." *Desk Set*. Web. 20 Aug. 2012.
- Kissane, Erin (kissane). "'Metadata Is a Love Note to the Future.' #nypl_labs." 28 Sept. 2011, 3:58pm. Tweet.
- Lang, Walter. *Desk Set*. 1957. Film.
- Lankes, R. David. *The Atlas of New Librarianship*. The MIT Press, 2011. Print.
- Lincoln, Abraham. "Gettysburg Address - 'Nicolay Copy' - Transcription." Library of Congress. Web. 20 Aug. 2012.
- LITA. "Top Technology Trends, 2002 ALA Annual Conference." 16 June 2002. Web. 14 Aug. 2012.
- Sarah (sarah0s). *Metadata Is a Love Note to the Future*. 2011. Flickr. Web. 18 Aug. 2012.
- Taylor, Robert Saxton. "Question-negotiation and Information Seeking in Libraries." *College & Research Libraries* 29 (1968): 178–194. Print.
- United States Forest Service. "Inyo National Forest - History & Culture." Web. 14 Aug. 2012.